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ABSTRACT

A survey investigated why high school students in one small city school chose Spanish as their foreign language of choice over French or Latin. Respondents were 103 students currently enrolled in Spanish at four levels. The survey was a multiple-choice questionnaire that also included space for an open-ended response. Results indicate that: 89 percent of the students were studying a foreign language because it was required for college; 45 percent had a personal desire to learn a language; career plans were an important reason for language study for 27 percent of the students; Spanish was chosen primarily because it was spoken in the United States more than other foreign languages, it was perceived as easier to learn than other languages, or was seen as more useful than other languages for careers. The information gathered is seen as useful in understanding students' perceptions of and motivations in studying a foreign language, and for selecting appropriate teaching methods. (MSE)

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Reasons High School Students Choose Spanish as a Foreign Language

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REASONS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CHOOSE SPANISH

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a survey of reasons why high school students in a small city school chose Spanish as their foreign language of choice over French and Latin. The survey was given to 103 students currently enrolled in Spanish courses ranging from level one to level four. The survey was a multiple choice questionnaire which stated various reasons for studying Spanish. The survey also included an open-ended space for other reasons. More than 50% of the students stated that the most important reason for choosing to study Spanish was because it was spoken by more people in the United States than any other foreign language, and Spanish was more useful in their career plans.

Reasons High School Students Choose Spanish As a Foreign Language

The tradition of studying a foreign language (FL) came to the United States in the 1600s along with the first settlers. However, over the years, FL study has gone back and forth from being a high school and university requirement to a "frill" elective (Roberts, 1992). After World War II, the Eisenhower administration established the National Defense Education Act which stated that FL teaching needed to be improved because Americans were deficient in their ability to communicate in languages of other countries, (Lambert, 1990). More recently, state legislators and educational policymakers at the university level have once again been revising the ideal curricular requirements to include the study of FLs, (Roberts, 1992). In spite of the political and business needs for studying a FL, FL study, according to Ramage in 1990, continued to have a relatively low priority in American high schools. Most American high schools have no FL requirement, and most FLs are limited to Spanish, French, Latin and German. Little or no instruction is given to languages of many immigrants such as Polish and Chinese. Ramage (1990) emphasizes the importance of American students studying a

FL by stating, "with the United States dealing in a world economy, living in an international political theater, and facing an ever-growing immigrant community within its borders, the need for people with FL skills is gaining attention," (p.190).

The recent push for FL learning is evident in a survey by the Modern Language Association in 1991: there was an 18% increase in students enrolled in courses teaching languages other than English from 1986 to fall of 1990. Since 1990, enrollments in higher education have increased by 15%, but enrollments in FLs have increased by 30%. The highest growing FLs between 1986 and 1990 were Japanese, Russian and Spanish while enrollments in French, Ancient Greek and Hebrew declined. Sixty-eight percent of the total growth in enrollment was due to Spanish alone, (Modern Language Journal, 1991). Such an increase may be due to what Mantle-Bromley and Miller found in their study (1991): "Students who in previous years would not have chosen to take the course as an elective now saw the course as a requirement if they wanted to continue their schooling. In fact 47.8% of all students indicated on the post-test that they had taken the course to meet college entrance requirements," (p. 421).

Kruidenier and Clement (1986) did a study on students'

motives for studying a second language (SL). Students listed their reasons for studying a FL or SL[1] as friendship, knowledge, acceptance by an ethnic group, travel, and getting a job. Kruidenier and Clement divided these motives under two headings: integrative orientation and instrumental orientation.

Integrative orientation is learning a language along with its culture in order to be accepted as a member of the group. It includes learning a language for the benefits of traveling, friendship and learning more about oneself and others.

Instrumental orientation is learning a language in order to gain something from it such as advancement in a career. In their study, Kruidenier and Clement (1986) found that the biggest instrumental reason for studying a FL was for advancement in school or career.

Kruidenier & Clement (1986) and Mantle-Bromley & Miller (1991) discovered in their studies that one of the factors of successful language learning is how motivated a student is. Mantle-Bromley and Miller (1991) also concluded that students who are motivated stay in the program longer. In an earlier study, Ramage (1990) made a distinction between continuing and discontinuing students in a FL program. Students who were primarily interested in

fulfilling a college requirement generally did not go beyond two years of high school FL study. In fact, there was a 50% decrease from first level to third level FL study. Without the college entrance requirement, half of the students probably would not be enrolled in FL at all. Those students that go beyond two years of FL study are more interested in the language itself (reading, writing and speaking) and the culture, (Ramage, 1990).

Horwitz (1988) did a descriptive study of the beliefs of beginning university FL students. Some of her findings may explain why more FL students do not continue beyond two years. I also have found many of the student beliefs in my own experience. For example, many beginning language students believe that it is possible to become fluent in about two years. Sixty percent of FL (Spanish and German) students believe that learning a language means learning to translate, memorizing a list of grammar rules or memorizing vocabulary lists. According to Horwitz (1988), students who believe language learning is simply a matter of translation, vocabulary words and grammar rules will probably not be able to use holistic strategies associated with successful language learning.

Teachers need to be aware of students'beliefs in order to make students aware of the nature of language learning,

Teachers should discuss with students reasonable time limits for learning a language and the benefits of learning even if fluency is not attained, (Horwitz, 1988).

It was with amusement that I read about a remark that one of the teachers in Horwitz's study made about her students. Horwitz explained that the teacher "spoke of her Spanish students who believed that English underlies knowledge of all other languages; that it, these students believed that all people, regardless of native language, first thought in English and then translated their thoughts into the appropriate language," (p. 294).

To determine the attitudes of university freshman toward FL, Roberts (1992) worked in conjunction with Michigan State University's Department of American Thought and Language. On the department's writing placement test were essay questions dealing with the usefulness or necessity of studying or speaking a FL. Students overwhelmingly stated that there was a need to require FL study. Surprisingly, only 48% said knowledge of a FL was necessary for business, whereas 80%[2] said that FL study was necessary as a study of culture to reduce ethnocentricity. Other reasons for studying a FL were because it would be helpful for American businesses to compete in a global marketplace, for travel and for world peace.

In another study by Roberts (1989), high school students stated such reasons for taking Spanish as 1) taking a FL to fulfill a humanities credit rather than taking art, music, speech or drama, and 2) preparing for college entry. Of the students who took a FL for high school credit or college prerequisite, "many chose Spanish because it was perceived to be the `easiest´ foreign language to learn," (Roberts, 1989, p. 740). Horwitz (1988) also found that students tended to believe that Spanish is a relatively easy language for native English speakers to learn. The problem with thinking that Spanish is "easy" is that students will get frustrated when progress is not as rapid as they think it should be, (Horwitz, 1988).

Other students chose Spanish simply because it fit into their schedules conveniently, (Roberts, 1989).

I also was curious as to the reasons that high school students choose not only to study a foreign language but to study Spanish in particular. I conducted a survey in which high school students were asked to choose reasons for studying a foreign language in general and Spanish in particular. The practical value is that often programs in high school can be taught more effectively if the teacher is aware of the students' perceptions.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were all students currently enrolled in Spanish I, II, III and IV classes in a small city school with a total student enrollment of 626. The majority of students surveyed were Caucasian English-speakers with no second language experience. Class time was used for completing the survey, but participation was strictly voluntary. Of 109 students enrolled in Spanish classes, 103 completed the survey. Two of the students were also studying French at the same time: one was enrolled in Spanish II and French IV and the other in Spanish IV and French I. Four other students had studied another language before taking Spanish: two had completed one year of Latin, and two had completed one year of French. Thirty-five of the 103 students were males (34%) while 68 (66%) were females. The majority of the students were freshmen (45%) with 39% sophomores, 16% juniors and 3% seniors. As would be expected with the majority of students being freshmen and sophomores, the larger percentages of students were enrolled in levels one and two: 36% in Spanish I, 39% in Spanish II, 19% in Spanish III and 6% in Spanish IV. It should be noted that in this particular school system, Spanish I is offered in eighth grade thus making it

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possible for freshmen to take Spanish II. This accounts for the higher percentage of students enrolled in Spanish ii as compared to Spanish I.

Procedures

During the last week of classes, students were asked to complete a questionnaire containing multiple choice questions concerning their reasons for taking a foreign language in general and taking Spanish in particular. Students were told to circle as many reasons as applied to them and to star (*) the most important reason for studying a foreign language, particularly Spanish. Reasons chosen for the questionnaire were based on the author's experience as a student and teacher of foreign language and on informal discussions with students. The survey also included an open-ended space for stating other reasons. The questionnaire included demographic information such as sex and grade level.

Measures

The questionnaire was author-made and data were measured using percentages. Because students were allowed to make more than one choice as to their reasons for studying a foreign language and choosing Spanish, the percentages add up to more than 100%. The most important reasons for studying a foreign language and the most

important reasons for choosing Spanish over Latin and French add up to less than 100% because not all of the students selected a "most important" reason.

Results

Of the 103 students participating, 89% were studying a foreign language because it was required for college. Sixty-seven percent stated that the college requirement was their most important reason for studying a foreign language. Forty-five percent were studying a FL for personal desire with 15% stating that as the most important reason. Career plans were an important reason for 27% of the students with 9% of them choosing that s the most important reason. (See Table 1.)

The same 103 students were asked why they had chosen Spanish as their foreign language of choice. The top reasons for choosing Spanish were that it was 1) spoken in the United States more than other foreign languages (50%), 2) supposedly "easier" than other foreign languages (46%), and 3) more useful than other languages for career plans (44%). Twenty-six percent chose reason #1 as their most important reason, and 24% chose reason #2 as their most important reason. However, the third most important reason for studying Spanish was listed as "don't know." (See Table 2.)

Table 1

Why Are You Studying a Foreign Language? n=103

	Reason marked	Most important reason marked
1) required for college	89%	67%
2) personal desire	45%	15%
3) career plans	27%	9%
4) spoken by family members	7%	4%

Table 2

Why Did You Choose Spanish? n=103

	Reason marked	Most important reason marked
1) spoken more than other FLs in U.S.	50%	26%
2) "easier" than other FLs	46%	17%
3) more useful than other FLs for career plans	44%	24%
4) don't know	26%	18%
5) other	13%	8%
6) more "scholarly" than other FLs	8%	1%
7) failed a previous FL course	1%	0%

Discussion

As was expected, the most important reason for studying a foreign language was that most colleges and universities in Ohio require two years of FL study for admittance. However, a student may still have to complete additional course work in the foreign language at the college level for a particular major. If a student completes four years of a foreign language in high school, then they have fulfilled all FL requirements at the college level unless of course, they are planning to pursue a major or minor in the language.

I was pleased, and somewhat surprised, that almost half (45%) chose to study a FL because of personal desire. As for choosing Spanish as the FL to study, it was not surprising that the 50% of those enrolled in Spanish chose this language because it is spoken more than any other foreign language in the United States.

Thirteen percent marked "other" as a reason. Such reasons included choosing Spanish because of a particular teacher, because of a dislike for French or Latin, because their friends chose Spanish or simply because they "wanted to."

With 46% choosing Spanish because it is "easier," I plan to heed Horwitz's advice and make students aware of reasonable time frames involved in becoming proficient in a

FL as well as the necessity to do more than translate and memorize grammar and vocabulary. Being aware of students' perceptions about and reasons for studying a FL allows teachers to more effectively relate to the students and to choose the best teaching methods.

Notes

1. It should be noted that FL and SL are not synonymous. The majority of English speakers in the United States who are learning another language are learning a foreign language because the United States is unofficially a monolingual nation. On the other hand, people in the U.S. whose first language is something other than English are learning English as a second language, (Lambert, 1990).

2. Percentages exceed 100% because participants gave more than one reason to study a FL.

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